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FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8279
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE 0028
RUEHFT/AMCONSUL FRANKFURT 0578

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 001304

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CMGT](#) [CVIS](#) [KFRD](#) [KPAO](#) [ECON](#) [CM](#)

SUBJECT: WHICH VISA LOTTERY? CONSULAR OUTREACH IN CAMEROON

¶1. (U) Summary: Although Embassy Yaounde visa procedures are of intense interest to Cameroonians and are readily available from multiple sources, they are often distorted in the public eye, usually by scam artists who prey on the desperation and ignorance of many applicants. This phenomenon is most pronounced in regard to the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery, which the Embassy made the focus of recent consular media outreach. The resulting print and television coverage should help mitigate the victimization of Cameroonians by unscrupulous "expeditors" - and provide an enlightening window into how successful these criminals have been in sowing confusion about the visa process. End Summary.

Who is our audience, and what is our message?

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¶2. (U) Although Cameroonians of all ages and walks of life play the DV lottery, the bulk of the winners who pursue their claim are 20-40, and are often students or young professionals. Accordingly, in addition to broad print and television coverage, the consular section generated an informational flyer posted at universities, cyber cafes, and transportation hubs. In addition to encouraging participation, and giving basic information on website, dates etc., the flyer focused on encouraging applicants to follow directions and to avoid involvement with, or victimization by, visa operators.

Which visa lottery?

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¶3. (U) Among the most surprising questions fielded by the Conoffs speaking with the press was the query about how many lotteries there are, and which are affiliated with the U.S. Government. According to the interviewers, there is a popular misunderstanding that there are multiple lotteries, including at least one which includes airfare and resettlement services. Other points of clarification ranged from the cost of the program, what the qualifications are, and what support is provided by the USG. Directing viewers/readers to the State Department website, Conoffs repeatedly reviewed the procedure for initial registration, strongly urging applicants to pay only for internet access, and to either complete the application or be physically present to ensure its proper completion.

Business opportunities gone wrong

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¶4. (U) Post regularly gets reports of significant abuse that fall into three main categories of scams, and which suggest that the opportunities for exploitation provide a negative counterweight to the goodwill and positive public image that is undoubtedly created through this popular program.

15. (U) First is the classic e-mail notification that "confirms" that a person has won the lottery and instructs them to wire money to get their visa or proceed with their case. Amazingly, this works here even if the victim has never played the lottery - perhaps because of the ubiquitous practice of playing for friends and family without necessarily informing them. Post takes every opportunity to inform the public that winners pay ONLY at the Embassy, on the day of interview, and that any e-mail notification is a fraud. Postal service in Cameroon is unreliable and notification packages are often delayed, but Post has seen very little mail fraud, and hopes to see the practice of notification exclusively by mail continued, as it offers an effective method for Cameroonians to identify a scam.

16. (U) Second are the copy-cat and fee-for-service abuses, where applicants are conned into paying to enter a lottery that doesn't exist, or to pay usurious fees for a registration that is frequently done incorrectly, if it is ever done at all. This abuse was the focus of the television and print outreach, and post hopes that a broader comprehension of the scams will reduce the profitability of perpetrating them.

17. (U) Third, and most disturbing, is the ransom approach, in which a manager of a cyber cafe or other institution completes the registration for a reasonable fee or at no cost, but provides their own mailing address. Should an applicant win, the winner then has to pay a hefty ransom fee to recover the documents. This is a much harder abuse to combat as the public education effort requires more nuance. Post fraud investigators have gathered information suggesting that some cyber cafes are targeting registrants in the current DV2009 lottery. Post has worked with local police on one such case, and is developing an outreach campaign

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targeting cyber cafes that we hope will scare them away from the practice.

Comment
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18. (U) Despite the opportunistic and malicious abuses that have sprung up around the DV program, it remains an alluring opportunity that embodies much of what draws Cameroonians to immigrate to the U.S. After a long interview on DV fraud and a somewhat heated informal discussion with a young, talented, foreign-educated journalist about how difficult it was to get a tourist visa to visit the U.S., she noted that perhaps this year she too would play the DV lottery.
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